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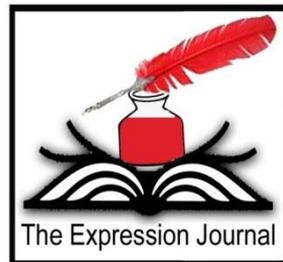
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CONTEXTUALIZING GENDER AND RELIGION: ANALYSING POORO'S CHARACTER IN *AMRITA PRITAM'S PINJAR: THE SKELETON*

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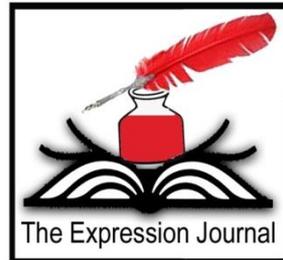
Abstract

Literature is a powerful weapon to record the scathing accounts of human predicaments of a particular caste, creed, community, sect or society. It helps us fathom the depths of human psyche, plump the inner turmoil and bring out the bitter reality of any society and capture the emotional zeitgeist of the ages and periods of English literature and brings to our focus the hidden and the bleak pictures of the hidden era. Partition is also billed as a most horrific time of the subcontinent history because it took the toll of many lives and it can be called that it presents the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. Many novels in English literature have been written on the communal violence. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Bisham Sahni's *Tamas*, Anita Desai's *In Custody*, Sorayya Khan's *Five Queen's Road*, Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Rajendra Prasad's *India Divided*, Krishna Baldev Vaid's *The Broken Mirror*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, Nisid Hajari's *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition* and Saadat Hasan Manto's *Mottled Dawn* are the texts which deal with the theme of communalism, partition or trauma. Women remain the worst sufferers due to violence, communal tensions and anarchy. The novel *Amrita Pritam's Pinjar: The Skeleton* written by Amrita Pritam is heart-rendering story of the time during and after Indo-Pak Partition of 1947. Women's anguish, identity, gender discrimination, affliction, rape, trial and tribulation, etc. are the core themes which have been emphasized with a focal light on the character of Rashid.

Keywords

Amrita Pritam, *Pinjar: The Skeleton*, Partition Literature, Communal Tensions, Violence, Women's Predicaments, Rape, Trauma, Identity, Mass Killings.

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Amrita Pritam is one of the renowned Indian woman writers who was born on 31 August 1919 in Gujranwala, Punjab in British India. She was the only daughter of Raj Bibi, a school teacher and Kartar Singh Hitkari, a poet, editor and a preacher of Sikh faith. She lived in a high religious environment of her family. Amrita Pritam's mother died when Amrita was eleven-year-old. But after her mother's death, she revolted and she refused to worship God. Instead of thinking of God, she started thinking about love. Her poems are very heart-touching. Their family moved to Lahore and later she came to India. Her first poetry collection *Amrit Lehran* (Immortal Waves) was published in 1936 when she was merely sixteen-year-old. She has written heart-touching poetry. D. P. Digole writes that, "Amrita as a highly sensitive poetess, had captured the pains and traumas of partition most compellingly and voiced the agonizing experiences of women through the archetypal story of protagonist, Pooro" (139). Rachna Arora and Smita Jha also write about this novel:

Amrita Pritam in her novel *Pinjar* (1950) narrates the gendered experience of the trauma and sufferings of partition. The novel is an exact picture of the violence against women during and after the partition of India in 1947. It portrays the plight of women, their struggle and sufferings due to the perpetrators of violence either, in the name of culture, religion or societal norm. (Arora and Jha 35)

During the Partition of India, around ten lakh people were murdered. Amrita married Pritam Singh and her name was changed Amrita Pritam. She left her husband in 1960 and started having her affection with a renowned poet Sahir Ludhianvi. She has depicted her story in her autobiography *Rasidi Ticket* (Revenue Stamp). When a singer, Sudha Malhotra came in Sahir Ludhianvi's life, she started her relationship with a writer and artist, Inderjeet Imroz. She spent around last forty years of her life with Imroz. Imroz designed covers of her books and published her through his paintings. She has depicted their relationship in *Amrita Imroz: A Love Story*.

She has received the first Punjab Rattan Award. She was the first woman to get the Sahitya Akademi Award (1956) for her magnum opus, a long poem, *Sunehade*. She received

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the Bharatiya Jnanpith Award, one of India's highest literary awards, in 1982 for *Kagaz Te Canvas* (The Paper and the Canvas). Apart from these, she has won the Padma Shri (1969) and the Padma Vibhushan (2004). She received D.Litt. honorary degrees from many prestigious universities including Delhi University, Vishwa Bharati and Jabalpur University. Her notable books are *Black Rose* (1968), *Revenue Stamp* (1976), *Shadows of Words* (2004), *Pinjar: The Skeleton* (1950). She wrote both in Hindi and Punjabi. She started writing at an early age. She married Pritam Singh, an editor the same year and her name was changed from Amrit Kaur to Amrita Pritam. She has written more than 100 books and her books have been translated into many Indian and foreign languages. She died at the age of 86 in her sleep on 31 October 2005 in New Delhi.

Amrita Pritam has seen the worst side of her life during the period of the Partition of India. Her novel *Pinjar: The Skeleton* also has been written in the background of trauma of partition. This novel was translated into English by Khushwant Singh. It is about a Hindu girl Pooro and her struggle to find her place in the patriarchal society. The novel describes a petite rural community of Chhatoani and its neighbouring districts like Rattoval and Sakkar in Gujarat district. The novel covers thirteen years from 1935 to 1948.

It opens with a positive note with the marriage preparations of the main female protagonist, Pooro. Her marriage was fixed with Ram Chand and her brother, Trilok's marriage was fixed with Lajjo. Her parents live in Taiwan and they come to their native village to pay off debts and to find a suitable match for their daughter, "Her parents were resolved to lighten themselves of the burden of a daughter" (Pritam 3). Hindu girls were not safe in this village and they remained in constant fear of the Muslim boys because now the village had majority of Muslim families and the Hindu families lived in the constant fear. That was the reason that, "Pooro was not allowed to go out of her home by herself. ... There was another reason to be cautious—the Muslims had become very aggressive. Hindu girls never ventured out except in the broad daylight of the afternoon (Pritam 5-6). Just before the day of the rituals of her marriage, her mother suggests her to bring some vegetables from her fields with her sister. She was much frightened that day because she has noticed earlier also that a Muslim boy, Rashid had eyes on her. The same boy comes on the horse and kidnaps her, "She reeled under the blow; she felt a human arm entwine about her waist and lift her into the air. She found herself lying across the horse's saddle" (Pritam 12). Pooro gets unconscious and when she opens her eyes, she finds herself at a lonely farmhouse where she was kept as a captive by Rashid due to their family amenity. When Rashid tells her that he has been compelled by his family members to take revenge because his father's sister was also kidnapped and kept in the house for three nights in the house by Pooro's grandfather. When Pooro comes to know about it, she feels shocked and a pall of haplessness and helplessness surrounds her. She just says, "If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine? You have reduced me to a homeless vagrant" (Pritam 17).

It was a good thing for Pooro that Rashid does not molest her and he is a good boy by heart. He frankly tells Pooro that he has done it only to comply the orders of his family members who wanted to take their revenge. Pooro begs to Rashid to let her go to her house but Rashid tells her that even her family members will not accept her after this incident but Pooro does not rely on Rashid words and she tries to find out the chance to escape after fifteen days from Rashid's house who keeps her locked all the time. Fortunately, one day, Pooro steals the key from Rashid's pillow and escapes while he was sleeping.

Pooro somehow reaches her house and her parents, instead of getting happy to see her back, seem to be more tensed. Her father Mohanlal says to return her immediately due to the fear of the Muslim family members who were behind Pooro's kidnapping. He says, "If we dare to help you, we will be cut down and finished without a trace of blood left behind to tell our faith" (Pritam 23). Even Pooro's mother, Tara also supports her husband and she also shows her helplessness in this matter. Pooro feels totally at loss because now she could go nowhere, ".....she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her father and mother, she had come with full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear" (Pritam 26). She has never thought that she will get this type of response from her parents. Her father says to her, "Daughter, this fate was ordained for you, we are helpless....The neighbours will hear. There will be a crowd" (Pritam 27). Pooro tries her best to convince her family members to let her stay with her family members but her father says, "Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and your birthright" (Pritam 27). Pooro gets annoyed at her parents' response and she says, "Then destroy me with your own hands" (Pritam 27).

Pooro decides to commit suicide by drowning in the well and but Rashid saves her and takes her to his house where their marriage ceremony is performed according to Islamic rituals. Rashid feels guilt-ridden to see Pooro's pitiable plight and he tries everything to keep her happy but Pooro curses her fate and she does not eat properly due to which she becomes very weak. She gives birth to Rashid's child also.

Pooro is not the only woman; there are other women also who also have to face the same problem. Among them, Trilok's wife and Pooro's sister-in-law, Lajo is also kept in a Muslim house and Pooro saves her by sealing blankets. Pooro's prying eyes search Lajo in every house and she finally identifies her by the tattoo on her hand. Pooro's husband, Rashid brings her on the horse at midnight. Rashid feels a bit relieved after saving Lajo from the clutches of the goons.

Men's cruelty on women has been depicted through a mad woman also who is also impregnated by someone. Amrita Pritam depicts the brutality of man on a mad woman also who is raped by someone and gets pregnant. When Pooro comes to know about it, she feels disgusting to think about men's cruelty. The mad woman dies after giving the birth to this child. When Pooro notices her, she calls her husband immediately:

Rashid came and felt the mad woman's pulse. It was not necessary, for death was clearly stamped on her face. But the death had not claimed her child, whose heartbeat with all the vigour of the primaevial life-force. It was sucking its left thumb. (Pritam 53)

When Pooro comes to know about it, she immediately calls her husband and takes the child in her custody and brings him up like her own child. She feeds this child for six months. Here also she faces a problem when some Hindus raise objection on it also. They say, "Shame on us all! We have let them convert a Hindu boy into a Muslim, as if it were the most natural thing in the world" (Pinjar 58). Ultimately, they take this child from Pooro and hand it over to a Hindu woman whether his health deteriorates and the child ultimately comes to Pooro.

Thus, Amrita Pritam has depicted the problems of women in this novel. She writes how a young girl was paraded naked, "One day Pooro saw that a young girl was paraded naked while ten youths in the form of procession accompanied by drum passed by their village..." (Pritam 91). Marriage becomes a turning point in a woman's life. Pooro's name is also changed as Hamida by her husband and likewise other women also have to face one or the other sort of problem.

“What can I tell you, when a girl is given away in marriage, God deprives her of her tongue, so that she may not complain. For full two years, I had to sell my body for a cup of pottage and few rags. I am like a whore, a prostitute.....there is no justice in the world, nor any God. He (her husband) can do what he likes. There is no God to stop him. God's fetter were me and only for my feet.” (Pritam 36-38)

At the end of the novel, Pooro gets an opportunity to return to India and her husband, Rashid also gives her liberty to take independent decision at this point by leaving that place but Pooro does not leave place willingly because she feels that Rashid is remorseful for abducting her and he is very cooperative at every step. He must not be penalised for what he had already done and accepts that it was his mistake. That's why Pooro gets listless to not to find Rashid nearby and she returns to him. As a conclusion, the novel is a story of numerous women who have to face different types of atrocities due to Partition. The novel presents a picturesque description of the mayhem, tumultuousness, violence, atrocity and havoc of that time of uncertainties for both the Hindus and the Muslims. Dr. Totawad Nagnath Ramrao also writes about this novel, “*Pinjar / The Skeleton* is a saga of helplessness of women and the struggle for survival of the individual amidst the socio-political and cultural forces. It is also about a tragic tale of conflicting loyalties” (Ramrao 5).

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